

# Philosophical theories for making good decisions



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## The Good Life

December 2018. The weather outside is frightful. It's snowing and sleeting as you slowly creep along the abandoned streets in your luxury vehicle. Off in your peripheral view you see a young child. The child, while old enough to theoretically fend for themselves but still too young to be outside, is walking in the direction you are headed. As the child takes two steps forward, the weather pushes him three steps back. You attempt to ignore his actions, but they become obvious when he approaches the crosswalk at the red light where you and your family are waiting. While you wait and observe, you ask yourself several questions; what is going on with this child? Is he homeless? Where are his parents? Ultimately you reach the main question: Should I help? While assisting this child in reaching their destination is the ideal option, the child may have other intentions. This indeed could be a distraction to robbery, or in an attempt to perform a good deed you and your family could be killed in the process. Decisions made during times like these can help one determine what is considered the good life.

As humans, we are meant to socially interact with different people within their residing community, while making decisions regarding ethical behavior. One primary decision that different human beings continuously make is how to live the most ethical lives (Mitchell, 2015). Recognizing that people distinguish things differently from one another, a good life may be different for each person.

## The Consequentialism Debate

Utilitarianism theory states that an action is right if it tends to promote happiness and wrong if it tends to produce the reverse of happiness—not just the happiness of the performer of the action but also that of everyone affected by it (Duignan, 2017). Utilitarianism also differs from ethical theories that make the rightness or wrongness of an act dependent upon the motive of the agent, for, according to the utilitarian, it is possible for the right thing to be done from a bad motive. In layman's terms, it is possible to do a good deed for a wrong reason. In contrast, deontological ethics holds that at least some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences for human welfare. Philosophers John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, utilitarianism is an ethical standard that generally views actions as being proper if the actions allow for the maximum amount of contentment and the minimal amount of dissatisfaction for everyone (Mitchell, 2015).

Bentham's ideas of utilitarianism assumed that mathematics could be used to calculate units of happiness or sadness for people who are most likely to become affected, and could use this calculation to measure an action's tendency for good or evil (Mitchell, 2015). Mill's ideas of utilitarianism claim that humans aim to reach the maximum level of satisfaction which in turn leads to the happiness of the greater number of humans. Mill and Bentham would end up being opponents due to Bentham's belief that happiness is measurable.

An example utilitarianism theory would be an elderly man (Jed) who has suffered a stroke on Friday and is not expected to make it through the weekend due to the amount of brain damage suffered. If Jed's family applies the utilitarianism theory and request that the hospital remove his organs for <https://assignbuster.com/philosophical-theories-for-making-good-decisions/>

use in saving others, then Jed's family can take solace in knowing Jed's organs are saving others while also celebrating the fulfilled life Jed has lived. This would be considered an act of utilitarianism in that it aims to reach maximum satisfaction for all involved. In contrast, the ethical aspect would view the family's donation of Jed's organs as killing him thus committing a violation of universal goodness because it is unquestionably unethical and unjust to kill. It is important to acknowledge that there are instances in which utilitarianism is both ethically and politically appropriate.

The direct opposition to utilitarianism would be deontology. Deontology does not regard consequences as a measure for making positive ethically sound decisions in order to live a good life (Mitchell, 2015). Deontology theory does, however, defend that human beings are ethically obligated to behave in a certain standard manner regardless of consequences (Mitchell, 2015). In the example of Jed, deontology would criticize the decision as immoral and unethical regardless of the potential positive outcomes. Under the ideology of utilitarianism, is hard to achieve due to one not being aware of another's motivation thus leading to decisions made on another's behalf without knowing if the intent would be substantiated.

### Virtue and Care ethics

Virtue ethics is among the major approaches to normative ethics that emphasize the virtues, or moral character rather than emphasizing duties or rules (deontology) or emphasizing on action consequences (utilitarianism).

A virtue is a trait or quality that is deemed to be morally good and thus is valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being. Virtue ethics

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theorizes that that if human beings promote moral personality, it will promote ethical behavior. Aristotle claimed that the two types of qualities were intellectual qualities established through insight and ethical qualities established through truthfulness and determination. In instances where a person is in obvious need, a utilitarian would focus on the view that the consequences of doing bring maximum well-being. A deontologist on the other hand would see that performing a just act would be abiding by the “Golden Rule”.

An example of this would be a person who follows the speed limit at all times. If this person continues to practice this method, without receiving any citations, they will be considered a responsible driver. Under Aristotle’s idea of virtue ethics, it was believed that virtue lives amidst excess and insufficiency and it emphasizes fairness without completely removing happiness. Contemporary ideas of virtue ethics declares human personality as the key element of ethical reasoning, which is portrayed by: (1) living a moral life despite the circumstances, (2) focus placed on society, agreement and relationships, rather than general equality, and (3) evaluation of human interactions that are based on creditable behaviors such as charity and compassion (Mitchell, 2015). An example of virtue may be as follows: Jim is in line at the grocery store. As he pays for his items and leaves the store, he notices a woman in line behind him fumbling through her purse as if she is looking for something. Jim pays for the woman’s items and walks her to her vehicle. Jim’s compassion virtue has allowed him to assist the woman without an expectation of reward.

Care ethics entails the belief that that, along with forming a moral personality, morality should also include the ability to genuinely care for another human being (Mitchell, 2015) and memories of receiving care and self-idealizations. When contrasted with deontological and utilitarian ethics, care ethics have affinities with moral models like Confucian ethics, African ethics among others. Care ethicists assert that the basis for ethical concerns should be our emotional responses to them. In line with this, they defend that special relationships lead to special moral responsibilities. It is argued that people cannot be seen as caring agents if they fail to care for the interests of other beings whom they are aware that they are suffering. Nel Noddings believed that care ethics is not only about caring for those one is already acquainted with, but that we should build relationships with new people as well. For example, Jim might buy his elderly neighbor groceries on a weekly basis due to their familiarity. To grow as a human being, Jim may want to start a food drive for elderly citizens in his town.

## Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions (“Existentialism”, 2002). Some of the concepts existentialism takes into consideration include: free will, decisions are not without stress and

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consequences, there are things that are not rational, personal responsibility and discipline is crucial to survival, worldly desire is futile and the belief that society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary.

Due to the variety of concepts supported by existentialist, there can be no one answer as to what it is only what it is not. Existentialists do not support any of the following concepts: the idea that wealth, pleasure, or honor make the good life, social values and structure control the individual, the notion that “ it is what it is”, science can and will make everything better, or the “ I want my way, now!” or “ It is not my fault!” mentality. Due to its wide array of philosophical, religious and political beliefs, existentialists have no universal agreement as what its central beliefs consist of. Existentialism was first identified post the Great Depression and World War II. It was believed that World War I destroyed the optimism of the country which led to philosophers believing well into the 1970s and beyond that people have the freedom to choose one’s preferred moral belief system and lifestyle. An existentialist may appear in many forms. They could be a student majoring in religion or an atheist manifesting their beliefs to others. Each basically agrees that human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power, and control one has over their life (“ Existentialism”, 2002). Existentialism is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life.

Existential ethics has a great recognition that morality starts with every individual’s fundamental valuing of personal being and his decisions to go on

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in existence in wholeness. Hence, every person has an important interest in the management of his valued life. Existentialism has remained one of the greatest philosophies. Existentialism assumes that people are totally free to make decisions and must take individual responsibility for them. Its emphasis is on action, freedom, and decision making. It also holds that the only way to rise above the normalcy of the human condition is by exercising personal freedom and choice. This view is not supported by determinism.

Possibly the most important part of decision making is the idea of free will. Free will ensures that decisions are made regardless of whether information is valid or not. Free will forces one to make a responsible choice without influences from laws, ethnic rules, and traditions (Mitchell, 2015). Free will is based on personal existence and preference.

Authenticity, ambiguity, freedom, anxiety, and bad faith are all elements of existentialism. Anxiety and authenticity help one recognize the truth, but anxiety presents two vital implications. Existentialists stress the critical nature of emotions and feelings, so long as they are presumed to possess a less culturally or intellectually mediated relation to personal as well as separate existence, thus anxiety stands for a particular existence that is its recognition of being. Authenticity is a central virtue found in existentialism that values remaining true to oneself instead of patronizing others. When authenticity is missed, the outcome is bad faith. One is seen as acting in bad faith if they are acting out of character by allowing others to control, their behavior and thinking. Therefore, one can conclude acting from bad faith diminishes freedom while authenticity opens one up for more freedom.



Philosophers' interest in ambiguity has largely stemmed from concerns regarding the regimentation of natural language in formal logic: arguments that may look good in virtue of their linguistic form in fact can go very wrong if the words or phrases involved are equivocal (Sennet, 2011). This has an effect on decision making due to multiple options one may possibly be presented with. Ambiguity can have a deleterious effect on our ability to inspect the validity of arguments on account of possible equivocation. ambiguity in the laws can undermine their applicability and our ability to obey them. Finally, ambiguity is one important feature of our cognitive understanding and interpretative abilities. Studying ambiguity and how we resolve it can give us insight into both thought and interpretation (Sennet, 2011). While people want to embrace freedom, our ambiguous nature tends to give up some of that freedom due to not wanting to either make a decision or make the wrong decision.

When it comes to living a fulfilled life, things such as life experiences, family interactions, memories and success play a vital factor in what can be determined as an "examined life". As far as experiences go, they are wasting the experience that is life if they just allow themselves to fall into a routine that doesn't challenge them to become virtuous. Many people do not examine their lives, not because they simply do not have the time to, but because they avoid the thought altogether. Some of these people tend to avoid this thought because they are just content existing and going about their lives as how they see fit, which would include recognizing the laws of the land as well as social norms they may exist. One might consider this existence an unfulfilled one, but as Americans we have been conditioned to

do as we are told and not ask or investigate the reasons. If you stray from this conventional thinking, then you are considered an outlier, troublemaker and to an extreme antisocial. But going against conventional thinking, does not mean that one is living an examined life.

What is the " Good Life"? For better or worse our lives are examined on a continuous basis. To eat or starve, what do I want to eat, does it serve any nutritional benefit? Since we are humans, we are all born with the mental capacity to reason and as we get older that capacity begins to fill with knowledge and with that knowledge we make decisions. Our species, unlike the rest, functions on more than instincts. We have the ability to have hopes and dreams, we have aspirations for our future and we make choices that get us closer to that future and dream. Even through inaction there is a decision to not act, and our life is not always about what we do but what we don't do.

Life isn't about following the social order nor is it about being a sociopath. A truly examined and fulfilled life includes a myriad of different experiences, both good and bad. In reality, we are all one wrong decision away from a changed life, either for better or worse. Our core system of values, for the most part, is what separates the civilized from the primitive. Marriage, child rearing, interactions with friends and family are some of the more meaningful aspects of " living" in my opinion, at the same time divorce, death and separation from loved ones offer valuable life lessons as well. All of these experiences help one to become a well-rounded and adjusted individual while also allowing room for personal growth and development.

In 41 years of existing, I have examined my life on several occasions and experienced things that some should never endure and some that are beyond the average person's imagination. All these experiences have led to what I consider to be a "fruitful" existence. But just like a bunch of grapes, everyone is not and occasionally you get left with a bad taste in your mouth. Just in case you are walking in a snow storm, please believe I would offer my assistance.

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